

Testimony submitted to the Committee on Children

February 7, 2023

SB 929 An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students

My name is Jennifer Mellitt. I am the Director of Business and Finance for the Southington Public Schools. Beginning in March 2020 and continuing through December 5, 2022, Southington Public Schools Lunch Program operated under the Seamless Summer Option of the National School Lunch Program providing meals at no cost to all students. From September through November 2022, our daily average student meal counts were 3,300 lunches and 1,100 breakfasts. Southington's SMART funds were depleted on December 5 and our Food Service Program reverted to students paying for meals on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Once students began paying for meals, our daily meal count dropped significantly to a daily average of 2,185 lunches and 491 breakfasts.

Inflation has impacted every family's weekly grocery bill and student borrowing has increased at all school levels since returning to paying for meals. The income guidelines for Free and Reduced meals is very restrictive and does not allow for any exceptions.

We agree there is need to continue providing meals at no cost to students, but we are concerned that SB929 will place an unfunded burden on school districts across the state. We request the state provide funding which when combined with the Federal Reimbursement will provide 100% of the costs including food expenses, labor costs based on union contracts, benefits, supplies, equipment maintenance and replacements.

We request that the state avoid placing a burden on Board of Education's Operating budgets. Southington's Board of Education operating budget for the 2023-24 school year is already feeling the impact of rising health care costs for our self-insured health benefits, the rising MERS contribution required at the state level, contractual raises for teachers and a large reduction in Title I funding for Southington. Our current budget proposal being submitted to our Town for approval will be a 6.28% increase over the current year.

We urge the CT lawmakers to properly fund any potential return to universal free meals for students without placing a burden on the already struggling boards of education.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter.